ALMOST ANGELS
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Psalm 8
Matthew 1:18–23
Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31

"Then God said 'Let us make humankind in our image . . . and let them have dominion.'"
Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

Genesis points to a mystery. It says that we come from further away than space
and longer ago than time. It says that evolution and genetics and environment explain
a lot about us but they don't explain all about us or even the most important thing about us.
It says that though we live in the world, we can never be entirely at home in the world.
It says in short that not only were we created by God, but also that we were created
in God's image and likeness. We have something of God within us
the way we have something of the stars.

Frederick Buechner
Telling Secrets: A Memoir

In American folklore, the village atheist was an oddity, an eccentric who marched to a different drummer, was indulged, tolerated, and mostly ignored by the vast majority of conventional God-fearing folk. To be sure, everyone sometime—ordinarily in the full blush of sophomore sophistication—entertains the notion that there just might be no one there, and there have also always been public intellectuals who have expressed their absolute certainty that there is no God and religion is sadly misguided if not an outright sham. And there have always been the Madeline Murray O'Hares, whose efforts to have courts remove references to God from the Pledge of Allegiance, public buildings, coins, and political utterances were mildly irritating. In spite of it all, the new president concluded his oath of office Tuesday with the traditional "So help me God," quoted from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians in his speech, and closed with the

traditional “God bless the United States” and, for good measure, “God bless you.”

But, in fact, the village atheist is not an oddity these days, making his arguments from a soapbox out on the edge of town with no one much paying attention. Today he or she is at the center of the culture, gaining notoriety and making a lot of money writing best sellers. In the process, the matter of the existence or non existence of God is, in our day, center stage.

Part of the new atheist’s argument is that religion is not only wrong but dangerous, that a lot of the tragedy, violence, and suffering in human history has been perpetrated in the name of somebody’s religion. It is a critique that is fair and needs to be taken seriously. Richard Rodriguez, a regular commentator on the *Jim Lehrer News Hour,* in an essay on why he believes in God, says that in the face of Islamic extremism, we Christians should be embarrassed by the memory of the violence in our history: the holy wars, the torture and murder of the heretic, the attack on the Jew, the Muslim, the pagan—all in the name of a loving God (“Why Believe in God?” *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery,* Fall 2007).

So in this new and dangerous world, this new global society with so much religious diversity, the new atheists have done something important by raising the issue of religiously inspired violence.

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain’s Chief Rabbi, who knows a thing or two about religious bigotry and violence, says, “One belief, more than any other, is responsible. . . . It is the belief that those who do not share my faith or my race or my ideology do not share my humanity. At best they are second-class citizens. At worst, they forfeit the sanctity of life itself. They are the unsaved, the unbelievers, the infidel. . . . From that equation flowed the Crusades, the Inquisition, the jihads, the pogroms”—and the profound and virulent anti-Semitism that resulted in the Holocaust (*The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 45, 63).

The new atheists are right to point out the culpability of religion in the story of human intolerance and violence and suffering. It is imperative that all religions acknowledge the diversity of the human race and human culture, including religion; acknowledge that religious truth is bigger than any of us, that no one has a monopoly on the truth; and that we are all in it together: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, unbelievers, and atheists. And at the very heart of *our* Christian religion, our belief system, our faith, is the revolutionary notion that every one of us—each and every one of us—is created in the image of God.

Part of the atheists’ argument is that religion is not verifiable, reasonable; that scientific objectivity is all we have ultimately, all we can ultimately

count on, and in that you cannot prove the existence of God, God does not, therefore, exist. We would all be better off without religion: in the words of the atheist bus ad campaign in Great Britain: “There probably is no God. So stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Base your life on what science knows to be true, not the unverifiable proposals of religion.

One of the greatest scientists, Albert Einstein, once famously said, “Religion without science is blind, but science without religion is lame.”

Science is limited in its ability to try to explain human altruism and self-sacrifice. Geneticists sometimes argue that the preservation and advancement of the human race is so deeply embedded in our DNA that it explains a parent’s denial of self in order to protect and feed and nurture her child, a soldier falling on a grenade to save his buddies. But somehow it doesn’t sound quite right. Some geneticists argue that we have a God-gene, that religion is scientifically explainable, but it doesn’t work for me, at least when it comes to the saints and martyrs going to their deaths singing hymns; doesn’t begin to explain Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr.. And it doesn’t work at all when it comes to art, to music. Where does poetry come from? Where did the Toccata in D. Minor, which John Sherer played so magnificently for us last Sunday, come from? Where does the lifelong discipline of the artist striving to express the beauty his or her eyes see in the power and mystery of the world come from? Van Gogh in his poverty and deep depression painting “Starry Night” and those startling sunflowers was doing something not adequately explained by genetics.

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann says that the words of the creation account are among the most important, most familiar, and most misunderstood when they are read as science, biology, history. To read Genesis 1 as an account of how and when and where creation took place always results in a collision with science and the discrediting of religion. This is theology, not science, a gorgeous affirmation about one who is before anything else is, the source of being itself, the one who is before time and space. It is about one who creates a universe with stars and planets and galaxies, vegetation and living creatures, cattle and birds and fish. For five days the account says—make that millions and billions of years—the process continues.

And then on the sixth day, a million or so years ago, God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, and let them have dominion over all of it, the fish in the sea, birds of the air, cattle and wild animals.” “Let’s put them in charge of everything.”

“So God created humankind in God’s image, male and female. . . . God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion.’”

Someone noted that “multiply and fill the earth” is the only commandment of God that human beings have fulfilled. And environmentalists sometimes lay the blame for the despoiling of the environment, pollution of air and water, and global warming on the attitude that seems to be conveyed in the creation story: “Subdue it. Tame nature . . . conquer nature,” we used to say.

But to have dominion is to be responsible, to nurture and protect. Human beings are not here given free rein to take whatever they want from the earth, to use it all up and damn the consequences. No, human beings are put in charge, given responsibility for the welfare and health and protection of the world, the responsibility to hand it over safe, clean, and productive to children and grandchildren. There is a moral mandate here, particularly to people of faith, to respect, revere, protect, and responsibly manage God’s creation.

Over the centuries, Christianity has developed more eloquence expressing human failure than human glory. Our doctrines of sin are more refined and familiar than the notion that humans are crowned with glory and honor, created a little lower than God says the psalmist, a phrase that used to be translated “a little lower than the angels.” “Almost angels” is how the Bible discusses you and me, created with the image of God in us, with the blessing of God on us and the responsibility to manage creation. It’s a high and holy vocation.

An old teacher of mine, who was also a clinical psychologist, used to say that the liturgy of the church gets off on the wrong foot when it begins with a confession of sin. Instead, worship should begin with an affirmation of human dignity and honor and promise: “You should tell people that they’re almost angels before you tell them how flawed and hopeless they are.”

The account of creation was originally written for people in trouble in the sixth century BCE, when Israel was in exile in Babylon. It was written for people who had begun to wonder whether there was any reason to have faith, to trust God, to have hope. And to those people came the message that God is the creator of all that is, that all ultimately will be well.

It was a reminder to those people that they belonged to God, that they had the very image of God in them. They might feel like nothing, prisoners of powerful, wealthy people who regarded them as nothing, chattel, property, a nuisance, but those in exile had the glory and honor of God upon them.

That it is good news in every age. To people regarded as second-class citizens, “You were made in God’s image.” To people oppressed, persecuted, discriminated against because of the color of their skin, “Good

news: you were created in the image of God." To people on the outside looking in because they are poor, disadvantaged, shut out because of sexual orientation, "Good news: you are created in the image of God." Good news to anyone who has ever been told "You don't matter." Yes, you do matter. You are important because you are the very image of God. You are a creature of honor and glory. You have infinite value because the very image of God is in you.

I received an e-mail yesterday from an old friend who, like me, lived through and witnessed and participated in struggles for racial equality in society and our church, with memories that will always be fresh, memories of police dogs and fire hoses, memories of a time when racism seemed such a profound part of the human psyche that we wondered if it would ever be overcome. "I don't cry, ever," he said, "but I cried last Tuesday." The tears in the eyes and on the cheeks of so many Americans last Tuesday were tears of joy and pride that part of the great promise of the Declaration of Independence, a promise rooted in that revolutionary affirmation made thousands of years ago—"Let us make them in the image of God and give them dominion"—that all men and women are created equal, was fulfilled. It was quite a moment, a moment that transcended party politics, a moment for which all of us, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, can be grateful.

The God in whom I believe is the creator of everything that is, a God who has put the image of God in every human being.

The God in whom I believe trusts human beings to be responsible and has high expectations and hopes for us.

The God in whom I believe wants you and me to be responsible for the world, beginning with the living of our own lives: responsible for the world and the nation, our society, responsible participants in the life of our community, its businesses, its arts, its entertainment, its churches and schools.

The God in whom I believe expects every one of us to show God to the world in our acceptance of one another, our work for justice, our compassion and kindness, our love.

The God in whom I believe is the one who places in our hearts the capacity to love, the impulse to give, to sacrifice self, to lay down life itself for the sake of another.

The God in whom I believe is the one whose creativity is expressed in human creativity, in the human thirst for truth in science, physics,

astronomy, medicine, and beauty, the God from whom and for whom music and poems and novels are written and art is painted and sculpted.

The God in whom I believe is in the world in the lives of men and women and children who bear God's image—that is to say, in you and me.

What is a Christmas text doing in an end-of-January sermon? It's because the angel telling Joseph that Mary's baby's real name will be "Emmanuel," "God with us," is the first hint of the incarnation, God becoming human, the word becoming flesh, right there on the first page of the Bible. Let us make humankind in our image.

In the fullness of time, which means God's time, we Christians believe God came in the birth of a child and in the life of the man the child became—in his kindness and hospitality, his courage and steadfastness, his goodness and mercy and love, his death on the cross and his resurrection. That holy, human life contains as much of God as we will ever see until we meet God face to face.

It is what make us Christians: the belief—not in an exclusive way that discredits anyone else's faith—but simply, humbly the belief that of all of us created in the image of God, the image of God was most in him, completely in him. To know him is to know God, to love him is to love God and to love one another as he told us.

Jesus Christ is his name, Emmanuel, God with us, the word of creation made flesh.

When we know him and love him, when we follow him, the very image of God shines in us.

A perfect illustration of what I have been trying to say was hand delivered at the end of the earlier service by Eleanor, age eight. El draws somewhere between Impressionism and Modernism, with a hint of Picasso as well. Eleanor created a perfect illustration of Genesis 1: blue waters, a bird-spirit hovering, blue sky and clouds, sun shining. I'm in there, dressed in black. Eleanor, in a green dress, is looking up into the sky and is saying, "Hi, God." She got it all right.

Amen.